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Deaf-hearing relations activists visit College

Smith and Justice describe travels

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Members of the local deaf community joined students to attend a presentation given by the two founding members of Discovering Deaf World (DDW), a recently developed national association that encourages the development of deaf organizations across the globe.

The Nov. 5 presentation, which was co-sponsored by the Deaf Hearing Connection and Kappa Delta Pi education honor society, was given by DDW founders Christy Smith and Dave Justice.

The presentation detailed the trip Smith and Justice took to eight countries to promote deaf-hearing relations and assist in the development of stronger foreign deaf communities.

"It is part of the deaf world and deaf responsibilities to get help out to deaf people across the world," Smith said.

Smith, a deaf woman who used American Sign Language throughout the presentation, was a contestant on the CBS reality show "Survivor: The Amazon" in 2003.

She and Justice came up with the idea for DDW in 2007 with the goal of traveling the world in search of foreign deaf programs.

After fundraising for a year, the two set off on a backpacking journey that took them to New Zealand, China, India, Australia and Thailand, among other countries.

While spending six to eight weeks in each country, Smith and Justice traveled to both major cities and small villages. Throughout this journey, they met with 101 deaf organizations, according to Justice.

The development of programs within each country was dramatically different, Smith said. In Nepal, deaf members of the community are assumed to be dumb and incapable of learning.

"I love my daughter, but she is a mistake from God. That is what most people think over there," Justice said.

In comparison, Smith and Justice found Japan offered a highly developed deaf community.

"In Japan, you have deaf people working front line jobs, working with customers," Smith said. "In America, how often do you see deaf people working in businesses with customers?"

A video clip demonstrating the interaction between a deaf worker and a customer pointed out what deaf people can achieve if they are given the opportunity.

"Communication was never a problem when they were given that chance," Justice said.

The presentation was only the second Smith and Justice have given since their return to the United States. The next phase of DDW includes editing more than 100 hours of footage and translating it into 20 languages to create a marketable DVD, as well as seeking sponsorship and funding to provide long-term support for the program.

Smith and Justice also plan to continue to travel the globe to discover more stories of deaf empowerment and create further connections with deaf programs in countries other than the eight they have already visited.

"It is our future goal that eight will be 50, will be 100 in the next few decades," Justice said.

Throughout their journey, Smith and Justice's mission to educate communities about deaf people was reinforced.

"We believe that a lot of oppression happens in deaf communities, basically born from ignorance," Smith said.

During their trip to Cambodia, they met a deaf teenage girl who had recently been employed by a café that encourages the assimilation of deaf people.

Before obtaining this job, the girl's father had often beat her, simply because she was in the way, Justice said. Now, she is the only person in her family who earns a steady income.

"How the tables have turned with a little opportunity," Justice said.

Although a recently formed organization, DDW counts more than 2,000 subscribers to their online newsletter, which further details Smith and Justice's trip and provides information about the future goals of the organization.

For more information on DDW or Smith and Justice's trip, visit discoveringdeafworlds.com.



Media Credit: Mike Smith

Christy Smith discusses treatment of the deaf community worldwide.